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Photo: Johannes Laurentius

SACRED SPRINGS AND A PERVASIVE ROMAN RITUAL

by Eberhard Sauer

In this article, the author has drawn on his doctoral research to review the evidence for the deposition of coins in sacred springs in antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Fig. 1). Where and when did this practice originate? How long did it continue? In order to come to a fuller understanding of this phenomenon, he draws interesting parallels with modern practice. We welcome Eberhard Sauer back to the pages of *ARA*. Since 2008 he has been Professor of Roman Archaeology in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh.

What have fish ponds at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, an ornamental water basin in front of the Zoroastrian Fire Temple at Yazd in Iran, a fountain at Barcelona Cathedral, a natural water feature in Gough's Cave at Cheddar, the Roman swimming pools at Bath and a dry well with a mirror at the bottom of it in the Limesmuseum at Aalen in Germany, in common? They have all received modern coin offerings, and the same is true for countless other watery features, ranging from the Trevi Fountain at Rome to a pool in Gatwick Airport (Figs. 2-4).

The deposition of coins in water, believed to bring good fortune, has become a ritual practised on a global scale. Where did it originate? Nobody knows at which spring the first coin was offered. Of course, it must post-date the introduction of coinage. Coins recovered from the spring at Burgaski Bani in Bulgaria, with the telling name of *Aquae Calidae* ('Hot Waters'), reach back to the fourth century BC and early currency has also been found in springs in Italy. Of course, metal artefacts had already been ritually deposited in watery features before the first coins were minted. The earliest offering from the sacred spring at the Artemis sanctuary at Brauron, east of Athens, date

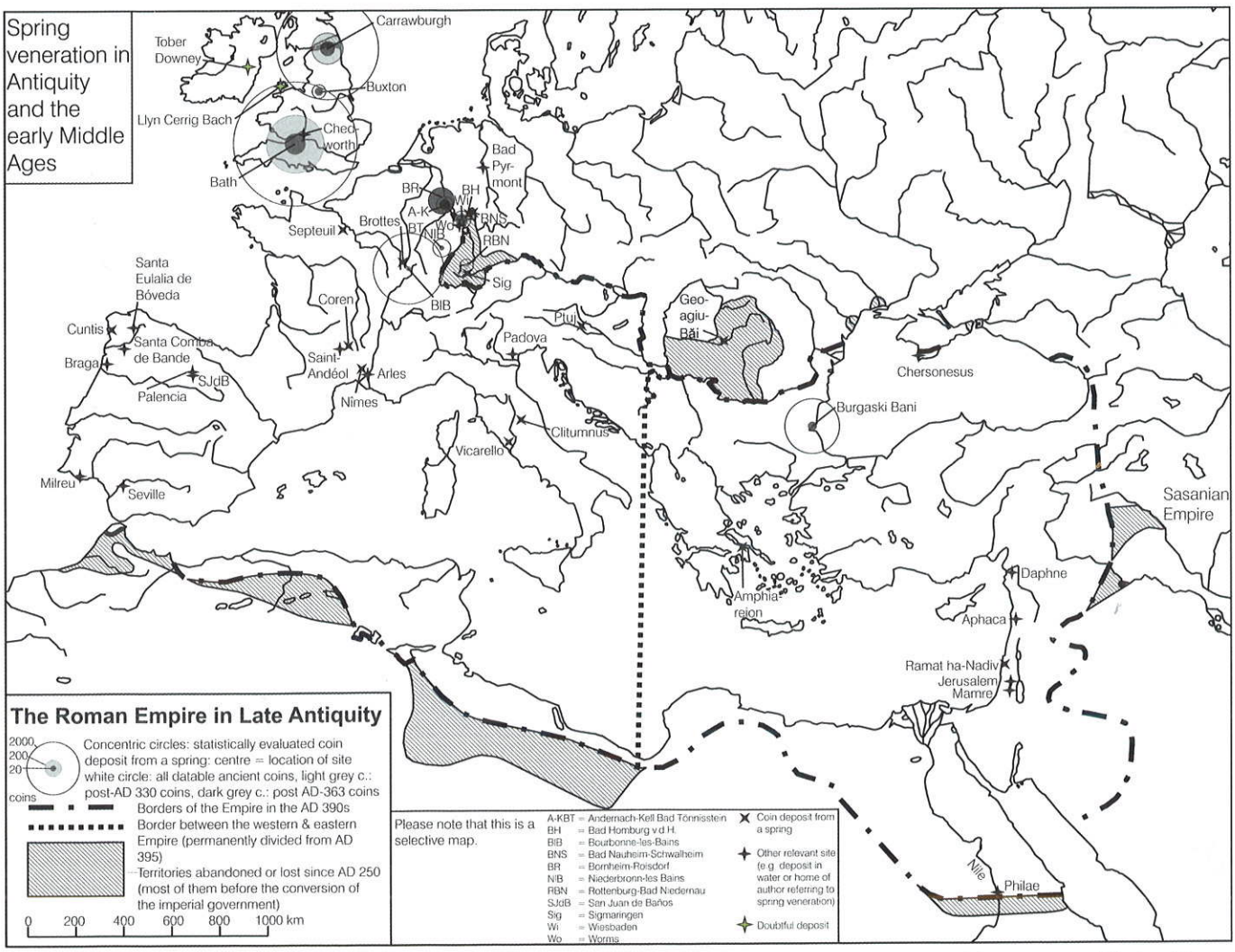

Fig. 1. Map of selected springs with ancient votive coin deposits. Map: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

to the eighth century BC. A wide range of Bronze Age and Iron Age metal artefacts have also been deposited in the bogs of southern Scandinavia and in the rivers of western Europe. This has led some to believe that coin offerings in springs in Roman Britain, Gaul and Germany are a ritual which continued previously practiced local native traditions. Yet, archaeology tells a different story. Unlike rivers and bogs, the number of springs in northern Europe with confirmed Iron Age offerings is minute, especially if one excludes late Iron Age objects, probably deposited in the early Imperial era. Amongst the over 12,000 ancient coins recovered from the King's Spring at the Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath (*Aquae Sulis* – 'The Waters of [the goddess] Sulis') only one in every 700 is a pre-Conquest issue. These few Late Iron Age pieces could still have circulated after the Roman Conquest and could have been deposited then. None of the ancient coins from the thermal spring at Buxton in Derbyshire

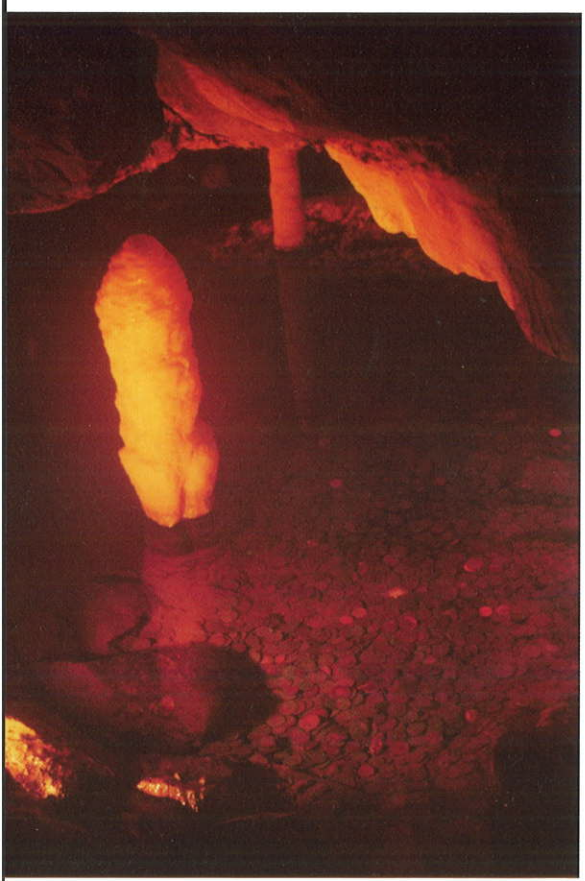

Fig. 3. Modern coin offerings at Gough's Cave, Cheddar Gorge, Somerset. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

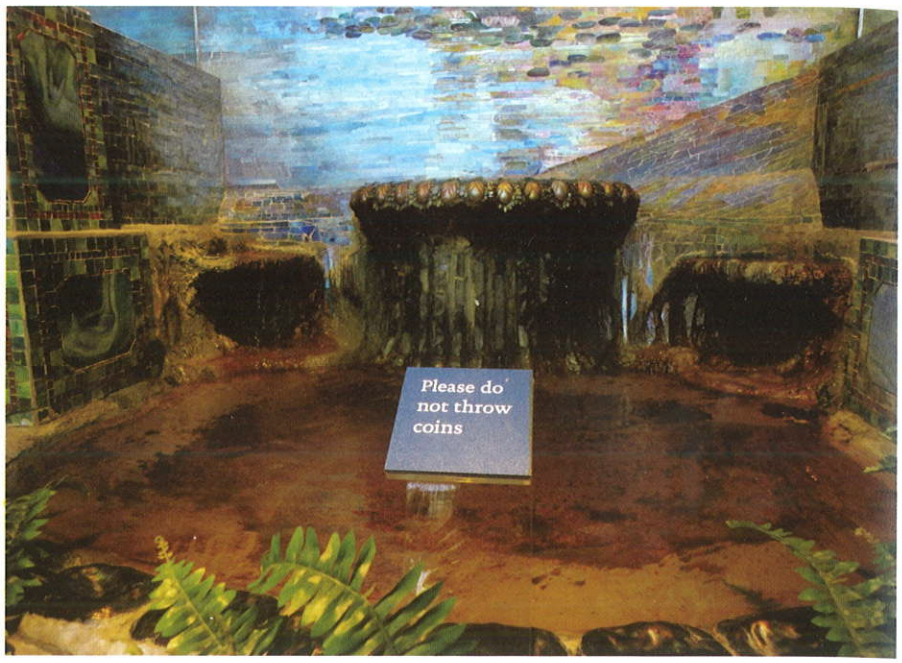

Fig. 2. At the Metropolitan Museum, New York, tourists deposit coins in every water feature in sight – or have to be discouraged from doing so. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

(*Aquae Arnemetiae* – 'The Waters of [the goddess] Arnemetia') or Coventina's Well at Carrawburgh on Hadrian's Wall, is an Iron Age issue. By contrast, we see a sudden almost explosive uptake of the ritual all over north-western Europe in the early Imperial era. At Bourbonne-les-Bains over 3,000 were offered in the last decade of the first century BC, probably soon after Roman engineers had succeeded in building a catchment installation, so that the 66-degrees hot mineral water could be used to feed a bath-house (Figs. 5, 6). Coin offerings commence in the Augustan era at a number of other Continental springs too, notably the spa at Wiesbaden.

Normally small denominations were chosen for offering, especially in Italy and the earliest deposits in the north. Under Augustus many halved asses, representing half the nominal value of this denomination, were a particular favourite. Nonetheless, one must not underestimate the value of such pieces. An as may be as small as a current two-pence coin, yet it represented a tenth of the daily earnings of a legionary, and thus was vastly more valuable than

Fig. 4. The Trevi Fountain, Rome: arguably the most famous water feature attracting coin offerings today. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

Fig. 5. Coins at 1:1 scale.

A: Quadrantes, the smallest denomination in the currency system at the time, were the favourite coins chosen for deposition in the hot spring at Bourbonne-les-Bains. No less than 1,500 of this type, with an eagle on the reverse, are still in the museum collections today.

B: Halved coins were popular too. Here a halved as from Bourbonne, minted at *Nemausus* (Nîmes), with a crocodile chained to a palm tree on the reverse.

C: Coin of Lucilla from Bourbonne, minted at Rome (AD 163-180). The coin with Concord on the reverse has been 'ritually killed' by approximately ten cuts.

D: An Augustan quadrans (bottom right) and as (top left), both from the votive deposit in Bourbonne-les-Bains' hot spring, may be of a similar size to the smallest coins in our currency today, but were much more valuable: a legionary under Augustus received the equivalent of 10 asses or 40 quadrantes per day.

Photos: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

small change today; a halved as was still worth some 5%. Coin offerings in antiquity were deliberate and meaningful religious rituals, not the casual acts we witness today. What motivated this practice in antiquity? A silver or gold coin was deposited in the spring at the Amphiareion healing sanctuary in Greece on the occasion of a successful cure from a disease (Pausanias 1. 34. 4), and similar motives may be behind many coin offerings at springs believed to have curative powers. Not all offerings need be related to a healing cult. Circumstantial evidence suggests that at some sites coins with the image of Augustus may have been deposited for his well-being, similar to a custom attested for the Lacus Curtius votive shaft on the *Forum Romanum* at Rome.

Unsurprisingly, the earliest spas in the northern provinces seem to have been built for the army. Legionaries, initially mainly of Italian origin, were accustomed to hot baths, and these were particularly welcome in the cold northern provinces. In addition to much-needed relaxation, hot mineral waters, such as those at Bourbonne, helped to heal fractures, wounds and rheumatism. The very same southerners also brought with them the practice of coin deposition in springs, well established in Italy at the time. The hot spring of Vicarello near Rome has yielded over 5,000 Republican and Imperial coins and the Fountain of Anna Perenna at Rome over 500 Imperial pieces. Pliny the Younger (*Letters* 8. 8. 2) famously describes coin offerings in the clear waters of the Clitumnus Spring: 'Underneath this [cypress-covered hill] emerges a spring, gushing out in several veins of unequal strength; it first forms a whirl-pool and then flows into a wide basin, so pure and crystal-clear that you can count the coin offerings and the shining pebbles.' (Fig. 8). Italy was the springboard from where the practice of depositing coins in springs started to conquer the world.

Yet, it did so with considerable regional variations. In Roman Gaul and Germany it flourished in the multicultural east and far less so in the west. In Britain, it remained confined to a far smaller number of sites than on the Continent. To some extent this may be related to geologically 'recent' tectonic activity having created more hot springs in eastern Gaul and Germany than in Britain. Yet, coin offerings are not confined to thermal waters. Indeed, one of the two largest recorded coin deposits in a spring in the Roman Empire known to me was recovered from a cold spring, Coventina's Well. The largest votive coin deposit from a spring in Roman Germany, at Bornheim-Roisdorf, was also extracted from a cold spring.

As mentioned above, it was the Roman army that appears to have introduced the practice to the Empire's north-western border zones, but it soon attracted local imitators, though with considerable regional variations. At Bath and Buxton the practice remained vibrant until the fourth century, whilst at Coventina's Well it continued on a reduced scale, but lost popularity. An early hypothesis that some of the coins from Coventina's Well are part of a hoard is unlikely to be correct, as the number of offerings decreased gradually over time, rather than suddenly. As with many other imported Roman customs, such as setting up tombstones for the deceased, it was left to local people (of sufficient means in the case

Fig. 6. Late coins (1:1 scale) from the votive deposit in Bourbonne's thermal spring (from left to right): a base metal coin of Magnentius with large chi-rho symbol (AD 350-353), a gold solidus of Honorius (AD 394-402) and a silver obol of Pepin II of Aquitaine (AD 839/845-852). Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

of tombstones) to decide whether they did or did not wish to adopt the practice.

Around AD 400 Rome ceased to produce large quantities of base metal coins for the northern provinces. As a result, the number of coin finds and deposits, at religious and secular sites alike, plummets after this time. A few springs have yielded coins of the following 500 years, but in the west there is no spring with more than an average of one coin per century during this period. The writings of the Church Fathers, strongly opposed to nature veneration, suggest that spring veneration now mainly adopted archaeologically untraceable forms of practice, such as praying, making vows, lighting candles or offerings organic substances such as bread. Unquestionably, medieval spring veneration had changed substantially, but a more materialistic approach survived. Whilst in the Iron Age springs had emerged largely as nature had created them, in the Roman period many, notably most thermal springs, were encased in architecture, to feed bath-houses as well as to form the foci for religious ceremonies. In the Christian Middle Ages the Church, having realised that spring veneration could not be eradicated, sometimes incorporated holy wells and springs into Christian ecclesiastical architecture, such as a chapel built over a spring in the middle of the forest at Marcilly-en-Bassigny in France (Fig. 9).

The veneration of springs and other natural features indeed proved one of the most enduring forms of cult. Not only did the Church lose the battle against springs continuing to attract religious devotion in Christian Europe, spring veneration also proved remarkably resilient in the wake of other profound changes. When, around AD 260, the Germanic Alamanni took over the land between the Rhine, the Danube and the *Limes* that had previously been under Roman rule, all Roman religious cults seem to have ceased. There is no evidence for continued ritual, as far as I

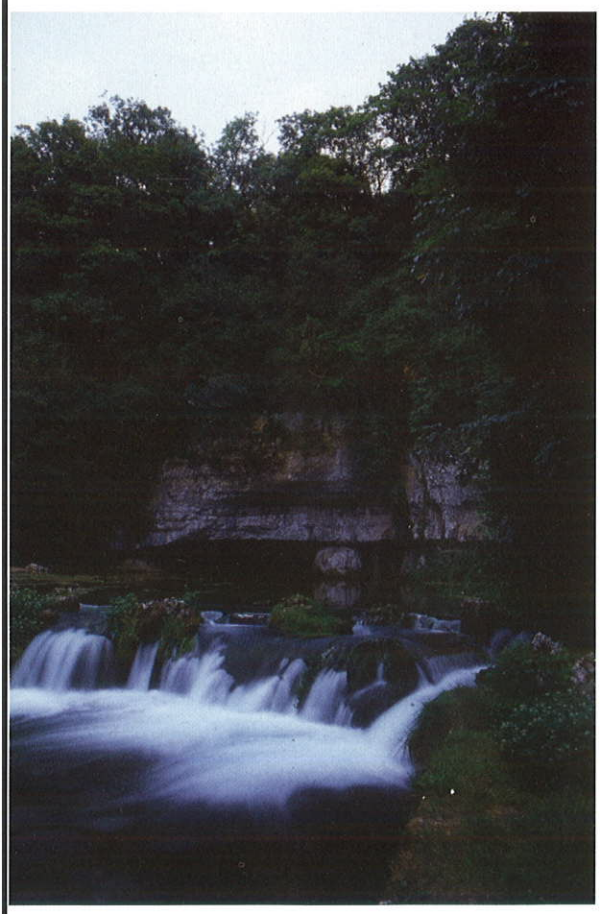

Fig. 7. The source of the River Douix at Châtillon-sur-Seine has not only yielded late Iron Age and early Roman coin offerings, probably all deposited under Roman rule in the later first century BC and early first century AD, but also brooches of the eighth/sixth century BC. It is almost unique as a spring in having received certain pre-Roman religious votive offerings.
Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

Fig. 8. The *Clitumnus Fons* in Umbria with its amazingly clear water was already admired by Pliny the Younger who saw votive coins under the water here. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

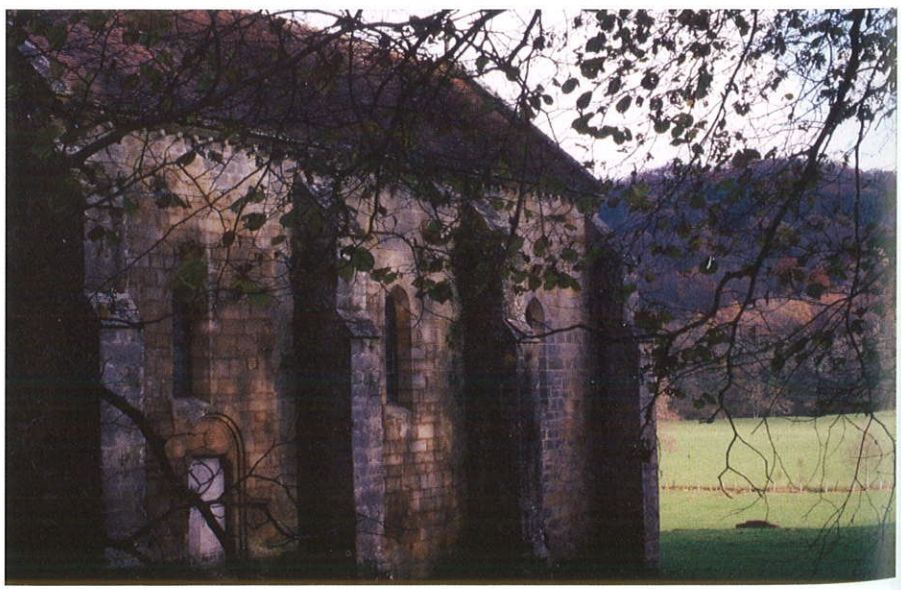

Fig. 9. Built over a miraculous spring in the forest: the chapel of Notre-Dame de Presles near Marcilly-en-Bassigny. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

Fig. 10. The water from the Römerquelle ('Spring of the Romans') at Rottenburg-Bad Niedernau is still in demand today. This Apollo relief was found at the Römerquelle, as well as some 300 coins, dating from Nero to Valens or Valentinian II. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

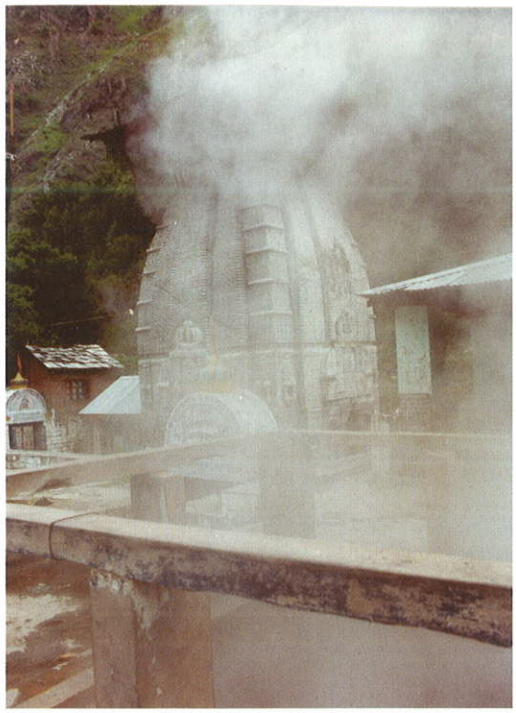

Fig. 11. Thermal springs formed impressive natural sanctuaries in prehistory, with clouds of steam forming over hot pools of water. As a result of most thermal springs being encased in architecture since Roman times, this is a rare sight in Europe today, but can still be appreciated at some hot springs. Manikaran in the Himalayas is sacred to Hindus and Sikhs alike. Photo: courtesy of Eberhard Sauer.

am aware, in any of the numerous excavated temples in the area. Yet, spring veneration survived. Several springs have yielded late Roman coinage. Most notably at Rottenburg-Bad Niedernau a spring, whose waters contain carbon dioxide and are still in demand as table-water today, received coin offerings until AD 364/378 or even AD 375/392, more than a century after the end of Roman rule (Fig. 10). Perhaps the Roman relic population continued to be drawn to this numinous place and only ceased to make such offerings when coins disappeared from circulation and were no longer available.

Spring veneration has a remarkable capacity to survive the most profound cultural and religious changes. Rottenburg-Bad Niedernau is an interesting example of this phenomenon and very much reminds me of a site I visited on a journey to Pakistan after my A-levels. In the suburbs of Karachi one finds the Mangho-Peer shrine, dedicated to an Islamic saint associated with a feature which is probably of earlier origin: a pool with thermal spring water forms the habitat for marsh crocodiles, fed with meat by pilgrims. Neither German invaders, nor Christianity, nor Islam have entirely succeeded in eradicating nature cults.

Whilst the types of offerings changed again and again as well as, to some extent, the springs and wells attracting worship, there appears to be an element of continuity in spring veneration reaching back some two millennia. The roots of spring veneration are lost in the mists of time. Notably those with hot waters producing clouds of steam must have been an impressive and wonderful sight to people in prehistory, before their waters were systematically used in bath establishments in the Roman era (Fig. 11). Yet prehistoric spring veneration seems to have adopted a largely immaterial and archaeologically untraceable form. Occasionally the strong local dominance of a deity with a native name presiding over a spring, such as Sulis at Bath, provides a concrete hint of likely pre-Roman roots. Yet, the mass deposition of objects in springs first occurs in northern Europe in the Roman period. After a lull in detectable activity in the Middle Ages, due to shortage of base metal cash, this practice flourishes today like never before, and so is perhaps one of Rome's most pervasive legacies.

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